

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT DEL TREDICI

K.T.: How did you start photographing nuclear weapons plants?
and people involved in working in the plants or
affected by the radiation from the plants? What was
the catalyst[?] that made you start working?

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B.d.T. The catalyst was the accident at Three Mile Island. After the accident, I went there for a year to do a portrait of the town and the people. What attracted me was the very mysterious and bizarre nature of what had happened. Things were reported in the papers that I'd never heard of before, like a wedding in a big church that was totally empty except for three people: the priest, the bride, and the groom. That happened on the Sunday just after the accident. There was talk of a mass evacuation; people were camping out in high school gymnasiums. All this in the middle of the modern world as if it were from a war-torn, far-distant country.^P And then there were people saying, "Well, actually nothing happened! Everything is fine" and others saying, "No, it isn't. We came to the very edge of annihilation." So that whole mix of extremely bizarre and contradictory things made me decide that

these people who'd been through the whole experience would be worth talking to and photographing. When I got there I learned it was extremely complex; nobody could agree about anything that had happened, *except that* ~~The only point of agreement was that there were a lot of reporters. Other than that you could take nothing for granted. So my vision expanded. An impression of the power of the fissioned atom as something very deep and very hard to perceive, very illusive, crystallized for me, but there was no tracking how deep it went. It was impossible to say, "Oh! It goes here and then it stops -- the effects." You can't tell how deep it goes and you can't see it in the first place.~~ That's what I *> space* remember now. *P* After the project ended, it just kind of gradually occurred to me that if this one commercial nuclear reactor could be so compelling and bedeviling and mysterious, what must all the other weapons reactors be like. Nobody ever talks about them. They've been going full steam, around the clock since they dropped the bomb on Hiroshima or since they were built in the fifties for the H-bomb. What are they like? Why don't we hear about them? And I knew that they were not subject to the same kind of environmental legislation or public awareness as a commercial reactor because they're within the kind of sacred zone of defense and they're covered with

secrecy, Because they make nuclear weapons, it all just dawned on me that this was an even better idea for a project. So that's what got me started.

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K.T.: Were you involved in any type of political activity before? Many people read about Three Mile Island, heard about or saw it on T.V., but didn't go there. What made you go there?

B.d.T.: I've never been a political person. So I was not involved in any political activity. What made me go there was the urge to see the faces of people who had lived through this thing. In the media, all you got were analyses of the industry and technical descriptions of what went wrong. The human factor just never made it onto the pages of the newspapers. I thought, "Well, I bet you there's something there. I bet you there's a big story. Human interest -- not news but something else; something even more mythologic, more epic, more archetypal than news." I felt people's souls had really been altered and shaken. So I went out to photograph these people. Then I had to end up using a tape recorder because what they talked about became as important as the way they looked.

P When I started, I couldn't figure out why everybody else wasn't photographing or interviewing people in and around nuclear weapons plants and Three Mile Island. It seemed so obvious, a basic, important, good idea. I guess that people don't do it because they can't afford the time. People whose job it is to report ~~and things like that, they have deadlines and they can't spend more than a couple of days on a story.~~ Since I'm not coming from that angle, I don't work like that. So I give it a lot of time and when it's finished, it's finished.

K.T.: But, why the nuclear issue. Why not unemployment which, in many ways, might be as evasive photographically or earthquakes or the war in El Salvadore.³ Why the nuclear issue as opposed to other ones?

B.d.T.: Because it has just the right mixture of complexity for me. I had long training to be a Catholic priest and I tried very hard to shake that training but it has stayed with me.

Unemployment and earthquakes are rather straightforward things. The nuclear issue couldn't be more convoluted, and on top of it all it has this religious dimension:

this righteousness to it, this mystique about it, this divine quality. You know, if you think about it, the atom, when it's split, releases energy that used to be matter. We don't have any experience of it on this earth and so, whether you believe in God, or not, the closest place you can point to is the sun and stars. So it's definitely celestial or cosmic and it's no wonder that around it grows a kind of institutional mind-set. Actually if you want to know the absolute truth, it's a chance for me to work out my former connection to religion. It just makes tremendous sense and it's something for me to sink my teeth into and to engage all of that sort of psychic involvement that I had, but which didn't connect to reality for me. Then the very real nuclear issue comes along and I'm attracted to it, ~~not because it isn't real,~~ but because there's something of that very similar complexity in the mind-set. Is it good or is it evil? Can you see it or can't you? Are people lying? Are they sincere? Illusion and reality? There's a whole mix, a whole combination of things that is just right for me. It's tailor-made.

K.T.: What ~~is~~ ^{is} the visual source material for people involved in the nuclear disarmament issue?

B.d.T.: Most people haven't seen any of it. The production of nuclear weapons is very significant, it's highly dangerous, it costs a mint. It's everywhere, and nobody knows what any of it looks like. Now, how many things are there in the modern world that you can say that about? I can't figure out any other thing that fits that description. It's a supreme photographic opportunity. You can't just assail it as if it were yet another social issue because it isn't. It's much stranger than that. If you go at it the way you'd photograph a disaster, ^{for example,} the earthquake in Mexico, you would ^{and} probably burn out or you'd bounce off the screens that are surrounding it. ~~(But I am interested in the thinking behind it all.)~~

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K.T.: Whose thinking?

B.d.T.: Here we are, we've got all this hardware, all this technology, and all the factories that have the technology that makes the hardware. Everybody agrees about that but nobody quite knows how we got into this in the first place. If we could only run the movie backwards to that point where it first leaped out of people's foreheads, maybe we'd find an answer. It's not as if there are some hidden conspirators in the woodwork, and if we could just nail them down we'd know

more; it's much more human than that. Still, it is the fruit of our own imagination. It's a manifestation of a certain kind of thinking and that's what I'm going after.)
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It's so invisible, but from my experience, quite permeable. If you approach it, it gives way and it allows you to photograph it. But most people cancel themselves out. They say, "Oh, they'll never talk to me or they'll never talk to anybody. In fact, you can't even go near the place."

> Spac 5 5/8"

At one point I thought that it wasn't permeable. Then I talked to Howard Mooreland, the guy who wrote that controversial article, "The Secret of the H-bomb", which the government tried to prevent him from publishing. Well, I had a long interview with him and he was saying, "And then I went to this factory and I talked to these guys and then I went to that factory and I talked to them." And I said, "Wait a minute! How can you go to the factories?" And he said, "Well, they have public relations people. And the job of those people is to deal with reporters and people who are writing things up." So he showed me that.

> Spac 4" (10 cm)

Then I took what he did one step further by renting an airplane and flying over the nuclear weapons plants. Everybody wanted to know, "How did you get these

photographs?" I said, "Well, I rented an airplane and I flew over them." Then they said, "But, but, didn't you get shot down?" Very knowledgeable people made these comments. There's a group in Washington called The Natural Resources Defense Council who are putting out a series of books on the arms race. One of their volumes is on the materials and weapons production facilities of the Department of Energy, and they couldn't believe that I'd gotten these photographs. They thought that it was impossible to do

(and here they are writing a book on it, and it's not.)

My own experiences have been that when I've tested it, it has opened up. So I'll just keep going. *The impulse is to find out about the thinking behind it all.*

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K.T. ~~I want to come back to the idea that you're trying to get at the thinking behind what's going on. But~~ photographs show very concrete things. So, how can you get at the thinking behind the nuclear weapons industry? Visually? Verbally?

B.d.T.: I do everything I can: I write letters, I make phone calls, I get permission, I work out the schedule, and I go there. And maybe there will be something that has that quality that I'm looking for and maybe there won't. It's not as if I got some kind of conceptual grid that I can filter things through. I just walk in

and I never know where it's going to come from. I'll give you an example: I went to the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory in Idaho Falls, and it's a huge vast piece of acreage that has all kinds of nuclear reactors, including the first commercial nuclear reactor in America. The first reactor to light a light bulb with its own electricity and all sorts of important projects. They recreated the Three Mile Island accident in one of the reactors but it didn't melt down. It was all controlled, but they actually did that accident; there's all kinds of stuff there. The navy has its own reactor station that nobody can even visit or you hardly even look at, it's so secret. So I spent a couple of days going around to all the different places and it was overwhelming, highly technological, a little bit more than I could handle but I kept looking for visual things and the guy said, "By the way, you mentioned that you were interested in historical things. Would you be interested in the old jet engines we've got out on the flatbed out at the end of the property?" I said, "Which jet engines are those?" He said, "Well, for the nuclear jet airplane program." And I said, "Yeah, I'd be interested. Let's take a look at them!" And we could only look at them from about a quarter of a mile away. These gigantic machines on a flatbed looked kind of

interesting, so I said, "Any way we could get closer?" And he says, "Well, I'll have to arrange special permission." So I stayed another day. Because ^T they were mildly radioactive, ^{so} you can't go near them without special permission, ~~and~~ I had my Geiger counter and it really was very low, maybe three or four times background level. But when you go up close they're these incredible behemoths and there were only two of them. Their purpose was to enable an airplane to stay aloft indefinitely. Then the planes, bearing nuclear weapons, could circle Mother Russia forever and, should the need arise, they could drop ~~the~~ weapons. They spent one billion dollars on the program testing out the engines. President Kennedy killed the program in the early sixties because of the development of the ICBM. The point of this story is that those were the things that had the visual quality that I'm looking for and it was almost an afterthought. It was like a piece of ancient history for the man taking me around. I could have said, "Yeah, they look okay, but I have to leave today." I've learned to follow up little leads like that because you never know. Sure enough when we approach these ^{monsters,} ~~planes,~~ they were incredible, gargantuan, unbelievable things. It's impossible to visualize an airplane being driven by something this huge. It's like a two-story house and it's a metal,

Rube Goldberg, nuclear reactor with two great big jet engines coming out of it.

So it takes a lot of curiosity and a lot of energy to keep looking. You go a thousand miles, you get inside the fence and then you keep going and you keep going, you keep asking and you say,

"Well, what's around that corner?" And if you have an extra forty-five minutes you ask, "Well, could we go for a drive?"

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Talking about drives,

K.T.: ~~A~~ Can you give a brief outline of ~~an itinerary~~ of your travels?

B.d.T.: I could try. Let's see.

K.T.: Major countries?

B.d.T.: Well, the major country is the United States. I criss-crossed the United States three times in the last three years: big, long trips, clear across the country, stopping at a lot of places along the way. I made two southern trips and one trip over the northern part. When you say, "The United States," it sounds like one place, but what I do when I travel is ~~that~~ —

go to an area and ~~then~~ rent an airplane and fly around it and come down and go to another area and then rent an airplane and fly around it and go down again.

So it feels like a whole lot of trips, which it is.

I've been to some of these places three times now, because they are so big and so indigestible at first glance that it's difficult to even photograph them, much less get a sense of them with your gut. ~~When I go back a second, and then a third time, then I feel that I know the place.~~

If you make the big effort and get there and it's just awesomely impersonal, and you quit, you stagger away, then you've lost all that effort. But if you do it, make ~~yet~~ another effort, then all of a sudden it's just your own. And that's kind of what's happened.

~~Then~~, I've also been to Japan twice in the last three years. I spent two and a half months two summers ago, and one month just this last summer. I think that sums it up.

K.T.: England?

> space #4" (10cm)

B.d.T.: Oh, yes! I went to England and to Germany. And that was in October, two years ago, during the hot, hot

autumn, when the cruise and Pershing missiles were just beginning to be deployed. I was at Greenham Common just days before the first cruise missiles arrived, and that's when the women cut down the fence for the first time.

I haven't travelled nearly as much in Canada as I've wanted to. What I need to do in Canada is go to uranium mines in Northern Saskatchewan. They're the richest mines in the world, but they're very far away, hard to get to. They are ^a_{an} world-class effort to support the nuclear weapons industry.

Then I'd like to go to Africa, to the Rossing mine, the biggest and oldest uranium mine in the world. People have been working on it for decades. Then I'd love to go to the Soviet Union, because I want it to be as balanced and complete a picture as I can get. And the Marshall Islands. That's a big area where there has been great nuclear impact. There's not a place in the world that says what it says. Lots of testing went on there in the 50's and 60's and the people and the land have suffered. It's the Pacific territory of jellyfish babies, babies born or aborted completely deformed because of the ~~efforts~~ ^{effects} of radiation.

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K.T.: When you photograph events like Greenham Common or a nuclear weapons plant or nuclear testing do you try and get a point of view across?

B.d.T.: Well, I guess every photographer does. First of all I try to get in front of the thing, which isn't so easy, and I try them to take a picture that represents it accurately. Then I try to pick an image that's interesting, that looks just plain interesting to anybody. A viewer should be able to respond to it even if he doesn't know about the arms race or nuclear technology. I make lots of choices along the way. For me, the most important choice is the last one, whether or not the picture has a kind of complexity or a certain power to it that makes it a good image.

I say that I am a neutral photographer. I'm not there to impose my feelings. I want the thing itself to just sit there. But it's not a neutral technology; it's highly controversial. I'd rather stay out of it photographically. Let's say that I think that we have too many weapons or that low-level radiation is much more dangerous than people are letting on, but I'm not sure how to get that into the photograph. So I don't bother. To me it's enough to just photograph the thing because I think, in the wash, it will come out. Low level radiation and the impact of nuclear weapons is

being worked on by lots of people but what people don't seem to be doing is actually documenting it. So I go in and get the pictures and let the chips fall where they may. At least I'll come out with the images.

K.T.: I think you project a point of view. Take, for example, the photo of the models of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs in the Los Alamos Science Laboratory.

> space 4"

B.d.T.: I call that one "Nuclear Arms", a visual pun. I think that's my most manipulative photograph^{not}, because I didn't move anything, but I certainly got myself in the position where I could make the photograph talk like that. All I'm saying is that it's certainly nothing new that Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the grand-mama and the grand-papa of the nuclear arms race, which is still reaching out more and more. So in a way it's not such a bad manipulation. I think it's a manipulation that captures the fact that the arms race is growing. If the photograph is a little manipulative, a little tilted or, you know, my own way of doing it and it has my own feeling about it, I try to keep it extremely low-key. I don't think people like to be told how they should feel about this matter. I think everybody's got their mind made up but what they don't

have is ^a ~~any~~ bank of imagery to fill in the slots. So what I'm doing is filling in those empty visual places in people's imaginations and I don't want to interject too many of my own thoughts because people don't need that.

K.T.: You had an exhibition recently at the National Gallery, (1985) and I felt I was looking at two different styles of photography . The portraits, in some ways, are quite romantic, and the images of the industry are more neutral and topographic. First of all, do you think the portraits are romantic?

7 Some sort of (unclear)

B.d.T.: I think so, I think I know what you're saying. They're kind of old-fashioned, they're kind of classic, and there's a certain strong emotional sense around them that fits into everybody's way of looking at movie stars. I think they're like that.

K.T.: The lighting, too, is very romantic.

B.d.T.: Well, the lighting I'm not really able to control.

K.T.: You could use flash.

B.d.T.: No, I'm not that kind of a photographer. I could but I

consider that a violation of certain documentary principles. I figure, try to catch it the way it is. I know that's impossible but using a flash turns it into something totally different.

But topographical? Let's see! There's only so much I can do with some of those big plants. I can't really make them dance the way I'd like to. ~~So~~ I never saw myself doing aerial photographs; ~~that~~ was something people who worked for the army did. But gradually I've ~~adapted to it and gotten to like it and to~~ see it as a photographic challenge like any other. It's just on another scale.

Most images that last have a quality to them:

- a permanence, a certain ~~something inevitable about them,~~
~~a beauty which has something to do with the right mix,~~
~~and something interesting about them and challenging,~~
~~and it's just the right mix.~~

K.T.: When you have talked about the need for beauty, in your photography, ~~it seemed~~ to me that you were talking about the structure of the image.

B.d.T.: Right! I'm not talking about the beauty of the thing ~~that's in it~~ but the form.

To me, the best expression of why we are concerned with nuclear warfare was in Jonathan Schell's work. He said

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that this thing was so serious and so fast and so total that it requires what he called, "Preemptive repentance". That we have to be sorry we've done this before we do it because if we wait until we do it there won't be anybody left to be sorry. And that touched me very deeply, ~~and I feel exactly that, we have to do something right now.~~ We've got this hair-trigger situation, and that calls for preemptive repentance, preemptive monument building, preemptive doing something. It's the strangest thing I've ever seen because with everything else, you can wait a little while and let it seep in and then go about recording it. But this is different.

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The World War of No Abode. "It's a war that's being waged with oceanic quantities of money, energy, time, materials, lives, paperwork, phone calls, coffee breaks, and nuclear weapons, because none of the weapons are allowed to explode, the war takes on a curious internal quality. For all the world it looks and feels like one big bluff, but it's no joke. Readiness is all, and finer and finer weapons are the exciting reminders that, yes, this is indeed real. This is very real, this war that's going on in all corners and it's also not happening anywhere at all."

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That's the war! It's on, full-steam ahead. And I'm trying to photograph it but it's so funny because people don't relate to it as war. The massive long-term deep preparations in a period of great peace have gone on now for forty years, so that when you finally flip the switch, it shouldn't be a surprise to anybody.

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K.T.: Have people who are pro-nuclear weapons, and I would imagine some of the P.R. people at nuclear weapons plants are, seen your photographs and what do they think of them?

B.d.T.: No. I don't show them my photographs. They have no need to know about my photographs, as we say in the trade. Need to know is a very important principle. They don't ask and I don't show.

K.T.: What do you tell them you're doing?

B.d.T.: I tell them the truth, "I'm interested in making photographic images of nuclear weapons technology." That's what I tell them. That's apparently not an abnormal request.

K.T.: And no one asks to see pictures?

B.d.T.: Pictures, schmictures! They don't care about whether the composition is this or that. What they usually say right off the bat is, "We've got lots of photographs we'd be happy to give you." And I say, "Well, actually, I want to do them all myself." So, they say, "Well, okay. Some things you can do but other things we can't allow to be photographed, but we'll give you a picture of it." But I tell them I'm not making a scrapbook of images taken by a lot of different people. It's a photographic work and they kind of understand that, you see, but they're not very curious. They have a job. Their job is to interface with people like me, and to give me what I need, and to do a good job at it. They don't know about photographic books and art or any of that stuff. They know about transferring information in a compact and efficient manner and doing it pleasantly.

K.T.: Would there be a lot of people on their doorstep like you?

B.d.T.: Practically, no one. As far as I can see, nobody ever asks. I could be wrong but I distinctly get that impression that there are so few people who come knocking on those doors, when somebody like me shows

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up, they're glad to see me.

K.T.: Is an ambiguous reading of your photographs important?

B.d.T.: I think so, yeah. I think the issue goes two ways. And for the pictures to be good pictures of the issue, they should also go two ways.

K.T.: Since you've done radio programs for CBC Ideas, and you've had an exhibition at the National Gallery, and you have plans for a book, and you're starting to do video. Are you just using different media to say the same thing, about the nuclear weapons industry, or are you saying different things with the different media?

B.d.T.: I think it all grows out of the same thing. The arms race just sits there like an apple on the table, but there's no one way to do it. I find it an incredibly inspiring subject worthy of all the artistic energy that anybody can put into it. I started out photographing. It just flowed right into tape recordings because what the people were saying was real interesting. And the tapes became a radio program. All my life I've wanted to be a cameraman but I could never afford 16m film, so when I started doing video it was

~~the result of, it was like a lifelong wish come true.~~

K.T.: ~~I understand that~~ Houghten-Mifflen is publishing a book of your photos and accompanying text. Would you ever do a photo book with no words on the nuclear issue?

B.d.T.: I think that no matter how compelling the photographic image is, and they ought to be good and powerful and stand on their own, you always need identification and some explanation of what this thing is and what it does. So I don't see my photographs without text. It's not a book of information that's illustrated with photographs. It's a picture-book. Out of the pictures come verbal explanations. I've always been a visual person and I've been interested in the relationship of images to text. The first serious work I did were some book illustrations to Moby Dick; and I took a quote and then I illustrated it. They were like editorial drawings. There was a kind of a dance between the pictures and the words. There's an interplay in this project also. I hope that you will see the picture first, and then you read the text. Then your way of looking at the picture changes. The text alters your perception, what you know about it, and that interests me.

K.T.: You've written a number of texts which I believe are going to be in the book. Could you read a couple of them?

B. d.T.: Okay, these are from Aphorism Atomici, ~~it's a town in~~

~~sp~~ This is called, The Man in the Uranium Helmet. "His head is heavy and his brains beneath the load are constantly bombarded with gamma rays. The expression on his face is unique. He has at hand the capacity for planet extermination and he has made a vow to use it. He has a strong sense of duty, a sense of heroism, and a sense of restraint. He is very patient, somewhat worried, slightly nervous, and firm. He is young. He is developing a cataract in one eye. He has not ever used his weapons in the field nor met the enemy in any test of will, nor has he tested his own will in this matter. He's the man in the uranium helmet and we haven't heard the last from him yet."

This next one is called, "The Horror and the Sobbing." "So far so good.", they say, in a tone of voice designed to back off altogether when the atoms hit the fan. The second half of that statement is this, "Oh well!"

K.T.: They're wonderful.

B.d.T.: This is called, Modern Art. "What is it that makes people have pointed heads with eyeballs extended, seeing from past and future at one time, has them walk in multiple freeze frame, no longer with any Newtonian point of reference. What dashed romanticism, embraced nihilism, fractured continuity, and laughed in the face of the divine. What defined everything before and knew, in terms of itself, not in terms of Nature or the social framework."

Atomic Pizza. "For crust: the Earth. For tomatoes and greens: people and trees. Freeways are the strips of bacon. Churches are the cheeses. Pickles and onions: Parliaments and Congresses. Pin the crust to the place with multiple thermonuclear devices, and sprinkle liberally with defective microchips. Season with activists, and pepper it with armaments. To cook: stand back, cross your fingers, close your eyes, lift your head, and pray!"

Oh! I've got to read this one. It's called "Behold the Elephant." "He endures, in the gentle giant wisdom of his face, there is the ability to outlast generations. The very ground shakes under his feet, yet he has no plans for world domination. In fact, he has become so

integrated with existence that he looks like a cross between a whale and the earth itself, and he has the memory to prove it. But even he can be cut down by an iron jeep full of laughing men with machetes and combat rifles, who plays no part in any laws of evolution that he knows. They spring up in defiance of the experience of all his tribe, yet there they are, real as clowns from Mars. And here he now lies, in the elephant mud, dead in slices. Humanity, in its more caring and enduring mode, has many of the qualities of the elephant. And humanity too has no defense against the laughing jeep-loads of weapons designers, and the shock troops bringing up the rear with thermonuclear elephant guns."

This one goes with the elephant one. The Crinkled Face of the Earth. "It's a face that's been around: lots of wrinkles and no bull shit; a face so caring, you wouldn't dream of insulting or exploiting it firsthand. Looking directly into its eyes makes you known in your depths and lets you see, in slow motion, how reality and imagination mix. It also shows you the origins of gold, turquoise, uranium, and suffering. This is the face that mothered termites, hyenas, orchids, and human beings. It's the latter that, digging deep, while reaching for the moon, came up with

a creation exclusively their own. The one and only element the earth cannot abide. The single thing of matter that fills it with indigestion and dread: plutonium 239. Saying in close-up, goodbye, to the face of the earth, can pierce a person clean through."

Here's another, Hail to the Chief. It was Hitler's audacity and his capacity for evil that lit our Bunsen burners and got us cracking on the bombs of doom. He was our inspiration, and his presence is still felt in between the lined in a twinkling, during which two cities were incinerated, into the world's greatest symbol of peace, strength, freedom. The rationale behind this liberated nuclear stance is very different from what Hitler's would have been. But deep beneath the posture and its rationale is that old-time atomic delight, the delight that lit the skies over Nagasaki and Hiroshima and that lit the ovens inside Dachau too."

It's true.